



Maritime History of Muslims in the Indian Ocean

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Abstract

The history of Muslims in the subcontinent surrounds a number of myths and fallacies about their seafaring activities. In this context, one of the commonly held assumptions is that the Muslim history has no account related to maritime affairs; rather Muslims had been reluctant to naval activities and they mostly confined themselves to the land routes for their travelling and trading activities. Owing to this delusion, their contributions to maritime culture and civilization have been either distorted or completely disregarded in several accounts. To rectify such historical fallacies, this paper explores and highlights the maritime activities of Muslims in the Indian Ocean. It traces the historical origin of the maritime affairs in the Indian Ocean during the pre-Muslim era in general and during reign of Muslims in particular. Historical facts and available literature reveal that Muslims had a long and traditional association with Indian Ocean. Being 'merchants', Muslims have contributed a lot in shaping the maritime culture of this region that is evident in the historical records. Arguably, the study can open new areas of discussions about the role of Muslims in maritime affairs with specific reference to the Indian Ocean.

Keywords: Archaeological excavations, cartographers, Indian Ocean, littoral states, maritime culture, navigators, seafaring activities

1. Introduction

Over the years, the Indian Ocean has become the busiest trading route owing to its strategic location. Geographically, it is surrounded by the Asian landmass in the north, the Arabian Peninsula and Africa in the west, the Malay Peninsula, the Sunda Islands of Indonesia and Australia in the east and Antarctica to the south (World Quest Study Guide 2010). The region has large deposits of raw material, such as, Bauxite, Chromite, Coal, Gold, Iron Ore, Natural Gas, Nickel, Oil, Phosphates, Titanium, Tungsten, Uranium and Zinc. These resources play a crucial role in the world's economy (Pandya 2011, p. 18). Moreover, it is the third largest ocean after the Pacific and the Atlantic Oceans. According to the classification of Lloyd's Marine Intelligence Unit (MIU, London), as mentioned by Pandya (2011) "it ranks only fifth out of nine regions in terms of commercial shipping call volume (the first three being northern Europe, the Far East and the Mediterranean Sea), the Indian Ocean is an inescapably central feature of global maritime trade. The Indian Ocean is undeniably the world's most important trading crossroads" (Pandya 2011, p. 19).

It is interesting to note that only Muslim countries encircle Indian Ocean's major checkpoints or waterways, straddling over the Suez Canal (Egypt), Bab-El-Mandeb (Djibouti-Yemen), Strait of Hormuz (Iran-Oman) and the Strait of Malacca (Indonesia-Malaysia). Thus, this area has been of great significance for the Muslim world in terms of political and economic interests.

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Against this background, the study explores origins of the maritime affairs in the Indian Ocean in pre-Muslim era in general and during reign of Muslims in particular. The paper has been divided into four sections. The first section examines the origins of seafaring activities in the Indian Ocean in pre-Muslim era. The second section discusses the political-cum-military history of the Muslims in that region after the rise of Islam. The third section caters to an account regarding the glorious role of Muslim navigators and cartographers in the pursuit of seafaring as well as commercial activities. Section four elaborates the major causes of the decline of the Muslim maritime power. Being ‘merchants’ Muslims have contributed a lot in shaping the maritime culture of this region that is evident in historical records.

2. Seafaring Activities in the Indian Ocean in Pre-Muslim Era

On the basis of historical evidence Chew (2007, p. 1) regards the Indian Ocean as the world’s first ‘cosmopolitan maritime arena’. The known history of seafaring and maritime trade goes back to the third millennium BCE. It was the time when three major civilizations, i.e., Sumerian civilization in Mesopotamia, the Indus Valley civilization in the Indian subcontinent, and the Chinese civilization in China, were flourishing around this area. Therefore, the earliest networks of seaborne commerce and cross-border interaction was made directly possible with the compact and closed character of the Indian Ocean, with its narrow entrances and exits vast and varied hinterlands, as well as climatic conditions favorable for both coastal and high-sea navigation (Chew 2007, pp. 1-2). Particularly, the seasonal patterns of the monsoon winds, which allowed sailing at specific times, further, encouraged sailors to use this area for their oceanic activities (Louro 2007). Therefore, the early growth of civilization made the Indian Ocean undoubtedly the foremost center of oceanic activity (Panikkar 1945, p. 22).

The earliest known maritime trade links between the Sumerians and the Indus Valley, along the Indian Ocean, originated as early as 2500 BCE. But, it is widely accepted that “the Egyptian voyages to *Punt*¹ were only real expeditions in the Indian Ocean before the first millennium BCE. According to Prasad (1977 p. 43) these voyages began to navigate by the times of the Pharaohs (2300 BCE), especially the Pharaohs of the fifth and sixth dynasties made great efforts to develop trade relations with this region”. Later, Phoenicians followed the suit and carried out their navigation far into the Indian Ocean. They traded in gold, silver, ivory, apes and Peacocks from *Ophir*². The ancient Indian texts, such as, the Vedas, Ramayana, and the Jataka (Buddhist) stories, provide ample evidences of regular maritime trade in the Indian Ocean during ancient times (Rais 1987, p. 10).

Another point of view is that the Arabs pioneered the seafaring activities in the Indian Ocean. The archaeological excavations of this region indicate that ships were built by Megan (probably Oman) by the local Arab traders during the Sumerian civilization. They used to import timber and other materials from India to build strong vessels (Chuttick 1980, p. 14). This argument is further substantiated by *Peripilus*³ of Erythraean⁴ Sea , regarding the trade of Indian goods. This report pertains to travel and trade in the Indian Ocean by a Greek merchant of the 1st century BC. It is narrated as: “likewise from the districts of Africa across this sea (Erythraean Sea), there are imported Indian iron and steel and Indian cotton cloth....” (Schoff 1912, p. 24). It is imperative to note that “the physical conditions of Arabia never did produce wood suitable for building strong seagoing ships. Neither did it contain iron for nailing them” (Haurani 1951, p. 5). It may be argued that the Indians were familiar with the art of vessels making prior to the Arabs. This fact also indicates about the frequent Indo-Arab interactions in this region.

Historians, like Chuttick (1980, p. 14), are of the opinion that “both Persians and the Greeks gained their knowledge of navigation from the Arabs. The Persian did not undertake long-

distance voyages until the 5th century BC and the Greeks did not undertake maritime voyages until Hellenistic times". It depicts that the Arabs did not restrict their knowledge to themselves only. Well-versed with the art of navigation, their ancient sources were full of numerous terms of navigation, sea voyages, and ships. For instance, they used the word Bahr and Yam for both river and sea, Qamus for an ocean, Khadam for a river, Safina and Fulk for boats, Khaliat for bigger vessels, i.e., *Ships*, *Milah* for navigation, *Mallah* and *Bahar* for a mariner, *Marfa* for a port, *Jedd* for a sea-coast, etc. (Recknagel 2004, p. 102).

3. Indian Ocean After the Rise of Islam

During the period of Holy Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him), the Arabs used to navigate through the sea. The first migration of the Muslims of Macca towards Abyssinia (present day Ethiopia) was done through the sea. Similarly, during the time of Hazrat Umar (634-644 CE), the second among the four Muslim Caliphs, the skyline of the Muslim navigation enhanced when Egypt, Syria, Persia and Mesopotamia were conquered. Hence, Muslims became the masters of two important naval and commercial centers of that time, i.e., Obulla and Alexandria.

However, the navigation in the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf started in the period of Hazrat Uthman (644-656 CE), the third righteous Muslim Caliph. When he was the Governor of Bahrain, he sent a campaign headed by his brother Hakam to India. In that campaign the Muslim battleships attacked Thana (a port near modern Mumbai). Later, under Mughira bin Abi'l A's, another campaign was sent to attack Daibal (Thatta), the important port of Sindh. However, Mughira was defeated by the forces of Raja Chach (Dahir), a ruler of Sindh at that time. Finally Mughira was killed.

It will be erroneous to assume that the Muslim history has nothing to do with maritime culture. The maritime legacy of the Arabs continued following the rise of Islam but with a new vision. Maritime activity of Muslims, in different parts of the world, was one of the primary factors behind the spread of Islam. It is worth mentioning that "the Muslims often brought commercial advantages to other fellow Muslims as well. For example, in the earliest phase of the trans-Saharan trade, the Soninke merchants of the desert edge saw commercial as well as spiritual advantages in adopting the religious faith of the desert traders. Islam in this spirit spread first to local commercial class. Afterwards it spread to entire society and on the frontiers of Islam from Senegal to the Philippines" (Curtin 1984, p. 29). Moreover, the moral character of Muslim traders and navigators, in all walks of life, largely impressed the people and consequently they embraced Islam. In retrospect, "the Muslim religion was held as a part of a broad process of cultural change largely by traders not conquerors" (Curtin 1984, p. 29) .

3.1 Political and Commercial Interests of Muslims in the Indian Ocean

With the coming of Banu Umayyads (651-750 CE) in power, the naval strength of Muslims gained momentum. It was a very critical time for Muslims because they were facing the enduring threat of invasion by the Roman Empire from the Syrian coast. Under these circumstances, Muslims established a shipbuilding factory on that coast during the reign of Amir Ma'awiya (661-680 CE), Muslim Caliph, in order to overcome the Roman influence in the Mediterranean. Moreover, during the Umayyad Caliphate Musa Bin Nasyr, Viceroy of Africa, established more new shipyards and created naval fleets based in Syria, Tunisia and Alexandria. The biggest shipyard/dockyard was located in Tunis (Section 1991). Till that time, Muslims were more involved in the Red Sea and the Mediterranean than the Indian Ocean.

It was for the first time during the reign of Abdul Malik (685-705 CE), an important Umayyad Caliph, that Muslims realized the importance of the Indian Ocean in real sense. Sind had always been the hub of economic activities because of its geographical location vis-à-vis Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea. It acted as a bridge between the Indian Ocean and overland trade. The merchant ships of Muslims visited the river Indus and distant islands of Ceylon. This trade link was mutually beneficial for Muslims as well as the Indians. Gradually, it strengthened the bonds of friendship between them. It is a fact that the conquest of Sind (712 CE) by the Muslim rulers in line with the same purpose as one of their primary concerns was to safeguard their sea routes.

With the passage of time, the Muslim traders established their communities in port towns, especially on the coast of India and Ceylon. The promotion of trade links, side by side, enhanced the cultural harmony and integration among the masses. Many Muslim settlers mingled with the local people and married the Indian women. It was the result of these close relationships that some local Indian rulers allowed those settlers to build mosques in the vicinity of Somanth and other areas of their suzerainty (Thapar 2005). In a short span of time, many settlements of Muslims extended, particularly on the western as well as south-western coastlines of India. These settlements proved very prolific in the wake of sea trade carried out by Muslims from Arabia to Ceylon and the Far East through India.

A new phase of Islamic history began, when the Banu Abbasids (750-1258 CE) established their rule. The formation of the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad proved more important for the future of the Indian Ocean that may be reflected from the steps taken by the new regime (Curtin, 1984). On account of political and commercial reasons, the new regime shifted its capital from Damascus to Baghdad. From the political standpoint, confrontation with the Byzantine in the Mediterranean motivated the Banu Abbasids to shift the capital towards a safe place. Therefore, to restrain the lingering threat of the Roman invasions, the shipbuilding factory at Sur was re-established. Later, Al-Mutawakkil (847-861 CE), an Abbasid Caliph, transferred it to Akkah. It might be considered as a serious step taken by him in order to create a fresh naval arrangement of the seashore. Soon, Muslims established their control in the Mediterranean Sea from the Syrian Coast to the Strait of Gibraltar (Haurani 1951). "The shifting of capital facilitated the sea-borne trade and communications in the east due to its unique geostrategic position. It was supposed to be an important waterfront in the world of that time having an access to trade carried out through the Persian Gulf, the Indian Ocean, South Asia and China. Eventually, the commerce between the Persian Gulf, Indian Ocean and China also flourished greatly under the Abbasids so long as Baghdad was the urban center of the Middle East" (Curtin 1984, p. 53). "Even before the rise of Islam, trade and commerce in the Western Indian Ocean had been largely in the hands of the Persians and the Jews from Mesopotamia. The new Sultans in Baghdad did nothing to disturb these traders" (Curtin 1984, p. 107).

In the meantime, the Fatimids (909-1171 CE) revived the supremacy of Muslims in Northern Africa. They were the contemporaries of Banu Abbasids. It became necessary for the Fatimids to build a strong navy owing to the severe competition that had started between the Muslims of Spain and the Europeans in the region of the Mediterranean. Thus, after realizing the need of the time, they tried to establish themselves as a strong maritime force in the region. As a result, the old shipbuilding factory of Tunis was highly improved. It is said that in that factory battleship was always kept furnished and well-equipped. The growing naval strength of the Fatimids helped them secure their economic and commercial interests. Gradually, Muslims began to extract benefits from trans-Saharan and the Mediterranean trade on a larger scale under their domain. On the basis of trade links, the relations were maintained with western India, Yemen, and Bukhara. It is important to note that the Fatimids embraced the commercial opportunities

for the Ismaili network, located in Sindh and Gujrat. Thus, it paved the way for trade stretched from the Indian Ocean to Cairo (Nadvi 1966).

Ottoman was the last Muslim Empire which developed political and maritime trade links in the Indian Ocean. With the capture of Constantinople (1453 CE) by Mohammad II, the sea trade link of Europeans with Oriental markets were abated. For the cessation of the European hegemony on eastern trade the Ottomans captured the sea route and Port cities lying between the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean such as Malacca Strait, Gulf of Aden and Strait of Hormuz. This affected the European economy severely. Ottomans maintained the traditions of previous Muslim traders and regulated the supply of trade items such as spices to European markets and thus kept the Europeans out of the Indian Ocean. One of the earliest efforts to restore the commercial links of Europe with Indian Ocean was named by Portuguese sailor Vasco da Gama who in 1498 CE discovered a new sea route to India Ocean via Cape of Good Hope.

Casale (2010) states that the archival sources indicate that prior to the sixteen century as the spice trade of the Ottomans was carried by intermediaries, Ottoman scholars and statesmen did not had up-to-date information about the geography, resources and the political economy of the Indian Ocean and their main political and economic limit was around the Mediterranean basin (Casale 2010, p. 17). This relative aloofness ended in 1517CE when the Ottoman Sultan Selim "the Grim" conquered Egypt and brought his empire for the first time in history into direct contact with the trading world of the Indian Ocean via Red Sea. In fact, this brought the Ottoman Turks into conflict with the Portuguese who were also attempting to hold the international sea trade in the Indian waters at that time. Thus, during the decades that followed, the Ottomans became progressively more engaged in the affairs of this vast and previously unfamiliar region, eventually to the point of establishing a systematic ideological, military and commercial challenge to the Portuguese Empire, their main rival for dominance of the lucrative trade routes of maritime Asia.

Khalifa Selim I (1512-20 CE) to defend Ottoman's economic and political authority on Indian Ocean and to preserve their control of maritime trade, various trade centers located on the rim of Indian Ocean such as Chaldiran (1514CE) and places like Marj Dabiq (1516CE) and Cairo (1517CE) lying on Red sea trade route were seized. As a consequence Ottomans gained the mastery of all the trade centers connecting the Indian Ocean with Mediterranean (Malekandathil 2010). The access of Portuguese in Indian Ocean disturbed the trade activities of Ottomans which later developed in the political rivalry. To foil spice trade of the Ottomans, the Portuguese started patrolling of the sea routes and erected a fortress in the main port cities such as at Quilon (1519 CE) and Cranganore (1536CE), the two leading spice centers (Malekandathil 2010). The Portugal discovery of the Cape of Good Hope route to the Indian Ocean initiated a series of fierce competition between the Portuguese and the Ottomans in the Indian Ocean for the control of the spice trade which led to the Ottoman-Portuguese naval wars throughout the sixteenth century.

The first military actions of the Ottomans in the Indian Ocean began during the time of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent (1520-1565 CE). The Ottoman Sultans because of the office of the caliphate used to see themselves as the protector of the whole Muslim world and were determined to keep open the haj traffic and trade route of the Muslims in the east as well as to protect the small Muslim states against the Portuguese attacks. When Ibrahim Pasha, one of the viziers of Sultan Suleiman, came to Egypt in 1525CE, he immediately ordered the establishment of a navy in the harbor of Suez and sent Selman Reis to the Yemen province to prevent the shores against the Portuguese attacks. In his report to the Vizier Ibrahim Pasha, 2 June 1525CE, Selman Reis reported the Portuguese activities in the Indian Ocean and considered Sumatra and Malacca as

important centers of pepper and spices (Casale 2010). Therefore, the control of the Red Sea shores, the Gulf area and the Indian waters became a vital concern of the Ottoman Turks from the middle of 1520s.

After the sudden death of Selman Reis in 1526CE, his cousin Emir Mustafa bin Behram Reis took the initiative, sailed towards Diu in India in 1531CE and fought against the Portuguese but ended in a failure. The second important Ottoman expedition against the Portuguese in the Indian waters was that of Hadim Suleiman Pasha in 1537 CE. This was actually sent in the request of the Gujarati ruler Bahadir Shah, who asked for military assistance from the Ottoman Sultan against the Portuguese. When the Ottoman navy under the command of Hadim Suleiman Pasha arrived in Diu in 1538CE, Bahadir Shah had already been killed by the Portuguese and the Portuguese appointed a new ruler named Mahmud Shah III to the Gujarat throne, who was then allied with the Portuguese. Suleiman Pasha, having failed to obtain the support of the higher Gujarati officials and also upon the hearing that a big Portuguese force was coming behind, was obliged to return to Yemen (Casale 2010). This attack made the Portuguese more vigilant. They not only re-strengthened the existing fortress but erected a new fortress at Konkan, Bassein, Diu and Daman (Malekandathil 2010, p. 115). In spite of these developments the Spice trade of Ottomans sustained.

Suleiman the Magnificent, to disrupt the Portuguese trade, in 1546CE made another attempt and send a large fleet towards Diu but because of the local assistance received by the Portuguese (from Goa and Cochin) they were able to repulse the attack. All these attempts to throw Portuguese out of Indian Ocean ended in failure and Portuguese empires continued to increase their influence, which threatened the Ottoman spice trade through the Middle East. As a consequence the Ottoman activities in Indian waters continued in early 1550s with more density after a decade of Suleiman Pasha's abortive siege of Diu in 1538CE. In 1551CE Piri Reis and in 1552CE Murad Reis fought against the Portuguese in the Khurmuz Straight and the Indian shores. In 1553CE, Seydi Ali Reis launched a new Indian expedition to give an end the domination of the Portuguese in the Indian harbors (Casale 2010).

In spite of the early failures another naval conflict (1580-1589CE) was started by the Ottomans who in the early phase were able to inflict losses to the Portuguese. But from 1589 CE Portuguese fleet recaptured the lost cities and caused heavy losses on the Ottomans. This attempt to revert the spice trade route back, also ended in vain. In the meantime, Ottomans and Portuguese both wanted to develop contacts with the Mughal Empire. But Mughals were skeptical of Ottomans; therefore, they developed relations with Portuguese. The absence of local assistance and continues defeats in wars forced the Ottomans to leave Indian Oceans in the hands of Europeans.

3.2 Seaborne Activities of Mughals

By the 16th century CE, the Mughals appeared on the political horizon of India. In the beginning, they were more inclined towards land-based expansion than the sea. But during Akbar's reign, the efforts were made to get a modest increase in the naval capabilities. The conquest of Gujarat, in fact, compelled the Mughals to realize to work on these stocks, as it was the important port city of India. Another reason was to save the seaborne activities of the empire. "At that time the Mughal navy had an impressive strength of approximately 3000 vessels but during the later Mughals its strength dwindled to 786" (Kaushik 1987, pp. 10-11).

The Mughals adopted a very advanced system of merchant shipping. Generally, ships were used for both purposes of trade and pilgrimage. Abdur Rahim Khan-i-Kahana had three ships constructed at Surat, i.e., *Karimi*, *Rahimi* and *Salari*. Similarly, Aurangzeb had also had a very

big ship *Ganj-i-Sawai* (Qaiser 1990, p. 195). Crew and officers were the important part of these ships. In that regard, Ain-e-Akbari gives a description regarding different categories of the crew, their wages and functions prevailing during the time of Akbar. For instance, the term *nakhuda* was used for the master and the commander of the sea, the *mu'allim* for pilot, the *tandil* for the head of the sailors, the *nakhuda khasb* for a supplier of firewood or fuel or fodder to the passengers, the *sarhang* for the supervisor of the docking and landing of the ship, the *bhandari* for steward, the *karrani* for the accountant of the ship and also provided (fresh) water to the passengers, the *sukkangir* for helmsman, the *panjari* for a man who stood on the top of the mast and gave information about the land or ship or an imminent storm, the *gumi* for a man who threw out the water which had leaked through the ship, the *top andaz* for a gunner and the *kharwah* for a common seaman (Qaiser 1990, p. 206).

3.3 Role of Muslim Navigators and Cartographers

The golden period of Muslim geography, travels and explorations run from the Ninth to the fourteenth century CE. During this time, a vast amount of travel and geographical literature, both at sea and land, was produced in the world of Islam, which ultimately paved the way for later explorations and discoveries of the Christian West (Institution-Al-Quran, 2008). Hence, it will be unfair to ignore the role of the Muslim navigators and cartographers in pursuit of seafaring and commercial activities. The valuable collections, they have left behind them, sufficiently demystify the nature of the Muslim maritime world. The Muslim navigators sailed beyond India to Indonesia and distant China. The route to China, which was opened by them, remained in active use until the end of the Ninth century CE. It was described at great length in an Arab nautical guidebook, *Silsilat-e-Tawarikh*, (Chain of Chronicles) written in the year 851 CE by a Muslim traveler, Suleiman (Kaushik 1987). Other works of this period were Ibn Khurdadbih's book, *Kitab al-Masalikwa' Imamalik* (Book of Roads and Kingdoms), and *Akhbar al-Senw'l Hind* (Notes on China and India). The former describes main sea routes to India, Far East and Korea while the latter presents a similar sea trading route and quotes Suleiman al Tajir. Around 1000 CE, *Ajaib al'Hind* (The wonders of India) was written by Buzurg Ibn-e-Shahriyar, which gives ample records of Arab voyages, along with monsoon winds, in the Indian Ocean (Tibbets 1971, p. 2).

With the emergence of Ahmed Ibn-e-Majid, a leading navigator, a cartographer and a writer of 15th century CE, there appeared a new growth in the field of navigational treatises. His contributions included sailing manuals for the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, the South China Sea, and the East-Indian archipelago (Kramers 1931). Particularly, his famous work, *Kitab al-Fawa'id fi Usul 'Ilm al-Bahr Wa'l-Qawa'id* (book of useful information on the principles and rules of navigation) were one of the important literary contributions. "It was written around 1490 CE. It is an information bank of the Indian Ocean, different sea routes to cross it, and the history of navigation from Hazrat Noah to the author's time. Moreover, it emphasizes upon the importance of the science of navigation in the light of its basic principles. The code of conduct for pilots is also cited in this work" (Tibbets 1971, p. 2). Moreover, it was Ahmed Ibn-e-Majid who helped Vasco da Gama during his transition from Africa to India. This is the prime reason for his fame among European sailors. His works on marine science and navigation of ships also provide a helping hand for people wanted to reach the coast of India, East Africa and other destinations. According to Sir Burton, "It even seems that Ahmed Ibn-e- Majid was venerated in the past century on the African coast as the inventor of the compass" (Kramers 1931, p. 96).

As far as cartographic work reign of Muslims is concerned, it was greatly based upon route information. It has been long recognized that Muslim navigators undertook sea voyages over vast distances. It became possible only because of the Muslim cartographers, who provided a

complete view of geography to navigators. They not only exposed world routes to Muslim traders but also paved the way for European navigators, who later defined modern view of geography (Recknagel 2004). The prominent Muslim cartographers, such as, Ibn-e-Hauqal (10th century CE), Istakhani (10th century CE), Hamdullah Mustafi (14th century CE) Hafiz Abru (15th century CE) and Isfhani (17th century CE), played a vital role during their times. They made very artistic maps of the world as well as of particular places such as Iran and India. It is believed that with Hamdullah Mustaufi, the Islamic cartography witnessed a shift from routes to meridians and parallels. Habib (1990, p. 128) is of the persuasion that the classical Arab geographers had woven their accounts of places and countries around and along the trade routes whereas, the later Arab geographers weaved their accounts around regions classed with iqlims, i.e., on the basis of latitudes'. It is important to note that "the skills of the Muslim navigators were well acknowledged and admired by the European sailors, who sailed into this region. The Europeans were also affected by the measurement of Pole Star for altitude by the Arab navigators. The Arabs called this 'Qiyas' and gave the height of the Pole Star above the horizon at all known ports. Even Marco Polo admitted that the Arabs had good charts"(Tibbetts 1971, p. 3).

4. Causes of the Decline of Muslim Maritime Power

The maritime activities of Muslims in the Indian Ocean started to decline with the coming of the Europeans. The three major Islamic empires, viz., The Ottomans, the Safavids and the Mughals, could not face the storm of Europeans in the wake of seagoing activities. Chew (2007) is of the opinion that 'Of the three empires, but the Ottomans possessed a navy powerful enough to prevent the Portuguese from closing the Red Sea to Turkish, Persian, Arab and Indian trade' (Chew 2007, p. 10). On the other hand, "the Mughals relied much upon military fiscal organization, the profitable symbiosis of military power and revenue resources, than the exercise of maritime power per se. Although Jahangir and Shah Jahan ruled an Empire heavily depended on oceanic connections, served by sizeable numbers of merchant and pilgrim ships, Mughal India lacked a strong navy" (Chew 2007, pp. 10-11). The new situation paved the way for the Europeans to stage their foothold in this region and eventually, they asserted their influence.

It is pertinent to note that "the Europeans arrived with strong support from their governments, and they attempted to change the rules of the sea"(Louro 2007, p. 25). "The Portuguese took the lead and proved their control at various points of entry, such as, Malaca, Socotra, Ormuz, and Goa. Soon they began to postulate that all other ships trading in the vast expanse of the Indian Ocean, and into the South China Sea, purchase passes from them and drop anchor at the Portuguese centers along their passage. The Portuguese could act so boldly because, first, the land-based empires surrounding the core countries of the Indian Ocean-including the Mughals-did not interfere with them. Second, the Portuguese successfully mounted cannons on their ships, enabling them to destroy any ships that challenged them" (Louro 2007, p. 30).They often interrupted the trade of the empire as well as the pilgrimage voyage to Macca.

In the course of time, other European nations, such as, the Dutch, the British and French also came ahead. With their arrival, a new era of power politics started in the area. The rules of the sea became much complicated than ever. Unsurprisingly, "the Portuguese were ultimately disadvantaged in the maritime sphere by their inability to develop any 'blue-water strategy'⁵ comparable to the Dutch and the English, who pioneered high-sea fleets capable of operating at long range from their home bases"(Chew 2007, pp. 8-9). Eventually, it was the "English East India Company which benefited greatly from this turbulent scenario of conflict and opportunity: playing off one native state against another, selling its own services and supplies in the 'all-India military bazaar.' At sea, the British proved their mettle as a free and conquering island race: Britain's naval victory over France at the Battle of Nile (1798 CE) effectively ended French

pretensions to a seaborne empire in Asia, and marked the beginning of a ‘British Lake’ in the Indian Ocean” (Chew 2007, pp. 12-13). Thus, the British emerged as a leading naval power, who proved the greatest blow to the influence of the other Europeans in general and the Muslims in particular. Gradually, they held their sway on the land and sea routes of India, which continued till the Second World War. The Muslim dominance in maritime trade came to an end on account of the disintegration of the Muslim empires, European dominance in the eastern trade and commercial activities , and sophisticated naval structure of European nations.

5. Conclusion

The maritime history of Muslims in the Indian Ocean delineates an interesting account of confrontation and cooperation in the wake of seafaring activities. Simultaneously, the experience of naval activities exposed Muslims to newer ways of maritime trade and helped them in establishing religious-ethnic ties with other communities. It was the result of their “policy of conciliation” that helped them to reap the benefits of seaborne activities. Thus, their process of learning continued to get excel in this regard. The contributions of Muslims in the maritime sphere have left profound imprints on the development of seafaring as well as trading activities in the subcontinent. Being the leading traders and mariners of this region, Muslims introduced new trends in the wake of the conventional system of trade. The policy of fair navigation enabled them to acquire a well-coordinated and well-knitted world trading system from the shores of the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea.

For centuries, Muslims remained the masters of the sea and land. Resultantly, their contributions in the fields of geography and navigation have largely benefited other people particularly the Indians and Europeans. In the Legacy of Islam, Kramers (1931) says, “Europe ought to look upon them (Muslims) as its cultural ancestors in the area of geographical knowledge of discovery and of world trade. The influence which Islam has exerted on our modern civilization in the spheres of action can be seen in many terms of Arabic origin which are to be found in the vocabulary of trade and navigation. The extent of influence can only be gauged through the historical developments of the domain over which our actual geographical knowledge extends” (Kramers 1931, p. 82).

Nevertheless, the dramatic developments over time changed the political and economic structure of this region and ultimately shrunk the power sphere of Muslims. Now the situation has changed completely. The Muslim world is not as much able to exploit the geostrategic and geo-economic importance of this region. To recreate the past glory, the best way is to adopt the modern science and technology particularly in the area of maritime sphere.

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End Notes

¹ According to Devendra Kaushik, *Punt* has been identified as either Mozambique or the Somalian Coast where Egyptian sailors used to go in search of gold and incense.

² G. F. Hourani considers *Ophir* as Sind.

³ According to Scoff, the title *Periplus* was the name applied to a numerous class of writings in Roman times, which answered for sailing-chart and travelers' hand-book. The title might be rendered as "Guide-Book to the Erythaeian Sea."

⁴ According to Scoff, the title *Erythraean* Sea was the term applied by Greek and Roman geographers to the Indian Ocean, including its adjuncts, the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. *Erythra* means Red, so that the modern name perpetuates the ancient, but we are assured by Agatharchides that it means, not Red Sea, but Sea of King Erythras, following a Persian legend.

⁵ The "Blue Water" policy is attributed to Don Francisco de Almeida, the first Viceroy of the Portuguese possessions in India. His "Blue Water" policy was to be powerful at the sea instead of building fortresses on Indian land. However, the Portuguese could not formulate any long-term strategy in this regard.